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AUTHOR Wheatley, Susan M.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Several studies converge in the finding that marriage is a salient transition event in the future expectancies of mid- and late adolescent females. Marriage figures more prominently in the future expectancies of late adolescent females than do other transition events, and more prominently in the future expectancies of adolescent females than does any other transition event anticipated by adolescent males. This study examined one factor which may contribute to the differential salience of marriage in the future expectancies of late adolescents: the effect which marriage, as an adult transition, has on adolescents' perceptions of adult status. Using a within-subjects design, 160 high school and college students rated the adult status of characters described in 24 vignettes. Vignettes covaried age and transition status in their descriptions of male and female characters. Analysis of adult status ratings revealed that: (1) marriage was more determinative of adult status for female than male characters; (2) marriage enhanced adult status ratings of both female and male characters when other adulthood transitions had been accomplished; but (3) when other adulthood transitions had not been accomplished, marriage exerted a compensatory effect in status ratings for female, but not male characters. The results indicated that the transition to marriage was more determinative of perceived status in female than in male characters. (LLL)

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Adolescents' Perceptions of Adult Status: Marriage Makes the Woman[a]

Susan M. Wheatley
Pacific Graduate School of Psychology
A. L. Greene[b]
West Virginia University
John F. Aldava, IV
Pacific Graduate School of Psychology

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[b] Visiting Associate Professor, Pacific Graduate School of Psychology, 935 East Meadow Drive, Palo Alto, CA 94303-4233.

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Abstract

Using a within-subjects design, 160 high school and college students rated the adult status of characters described in 24 vignettes. Vignettes covaried age and transition status (that is, establishment of an independent household, full-time employment, marriage) in their descriptions of male and female characters. MANOVA analysis of adult status ratings revealed that: (a) marriage was more determinative of adult status for female than male characters; (b) marriage enhanced adult status ratings of both female and male characters when other adulthood transitions had been accomplished; but (c) when other adulthood transitions had not been accomplished, marriage exerted a compensatory effect in status ratings for female, but not male characters. The implications of these findings for adolescents' implicit theories of adulthood are considered.

Adolescents' Perceptions of Adult Status: Marriage Makes the Woman

Several studies converge in the finding that marriage is a salient transition event in the future expectancies of mid- and late adolescent females: More females than males anticipate marriage in young adulthood and females anticipate significantly younger ages at marriage than do males (Greene, 1990; Greene & Wheatley, 1991). Marriage also figures more prominently in the future expectancies of late adolescent females than do other transition events (e.g., living independently or full-time employment) and more prominently in the future expectancies of adolescent females than does any other transition event anticipated by adolescent males (Crouter, et al, 1988; Greene, 1990; Greene, Wheatley, & Vogel, 1991).

Gender differences in the anticipated occurrence and timing of marriage also are consistent with the beliefs that adolescents hold about what is prescriptively normative in adulthood. For example, Greene, Wheatley, and Aldava (1991) found that female and male adolescents commonly believed that younger ages at marriage and parenthood were normative for women: Whereas the "average woman" was expected to marry by 24 years of age, the "average man" was not expected to marry until 26. In contrast, no differences were obtained in the ages at which the average woman and man were expected to complete formal education or to enter full-time employment.

The present paper considers one factor which may contribute to the differential salience of marriage in the future

expectancies of late adolescents: The effect which marriage, as an adulthood transition, has on adolescents' perceptions of adult status. We suggest that to the extent that the adulthood transition is configured by a culturally-determined sequence of role ascensions (Marini, 1984, 1987; Rosow, 1976), adolescents may believe that marriage confers a unique adult status to women; one that is more uniquely adult for women than is the accomplishment of other adulthood transitions (e.g., establishing an independent household, full-time employment). The present paper examined these hypotheses using data obtained in a larger investigation of adolescents' implicit theories of the life course (Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1991; Greene, Wheatley, & Vogel, 1991).

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 40 female and 40 male high school (M=17.55 years) and 39 female and 41 male college students (M=20.7 years). High school students were selected from a volunteer pool at the local high school; college students were recruited from a volunteer pool then enrolled in an introductory psychology class at the local university.

All of the participants were Caucasian and derived from two-parent, nuclear families. The majority of the sample was middle (43%) and working-class (36%), as determined by the fathers' educational level and occupation. Of the remainder, 15% were from upper-middle-class and seven percent were from lower income

families. None of the participants had ever been married or parents.

Instruments and Procedure

Drawing from demographic studies of the adulthood transition (Hogan, 1985: Hogan & Astone, 1986; Marini, 1985, 1987), 24 vignettes were developed to assess adolescents' perceptions of adult status. Vignettes systematically covaried age and transition status in their descriptions of male and female characters. Each vignette described a character who was either: (a) 18-, 21-, or 25-years-old; (b) married or single; (c) working full-time or not working; and (d) living with parents or living independently (e.g., "Jane is 25 years old. She is single and is not employed. Jane lives with her parents. How adult do you think Jane is?"). Adolescents rated their perceptions of the adult status of each character using a seven-point Likert scale (1=not at all an adult; 7=very much an adult).

Data were obtained in one hour, group sessions conducted at the local high school or in a lab room in the psychology department. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two protocol conditions (female versus male vignette characters), with equal representation of female and male students in each condition. Protocols contained a set of written instructions for completing the items; as well, examiners read the instructions aloud to ensure that all students understood the task.

Results

A 2 (Participant Gender) x 2 (Participant Age Group) x 2 (Character Gender) MANOVA of adult status ratings was performed,

with the four transition statuses (Character Age, Marital Status, Employment, and Residence) included as within-subjects factors. For purposes of this paper, we consider only results obtained in post hoc analyses of the interactions obtained for marital status.[1]

First, marriage was more determinative of perceived adult status in female than in male characters. As shown in Figure 1, adolescents perceived married female characters to be more adult than single female characters, whereas married and single male characters were perceived to be comparably adult (that is, no significant differences).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Second, marriage enhanced the perceived adult status of both female and male characters when other adulthood transitions had been accomplished. As shown in Figure 2, for example, adolescents perceived married characters who lived independently to be more adult than single characters who lived independently, regardless of gender.

Insert Figure 2 about here

When other adulthood transitions had *not* been accomplished, however, marriage exerted a compensatory effect in perceived adult status for female, but not male characters. As shown in Figure 3, for example, unemployed female characters were

perceived to be more adult when married than when single ($p<.001$), whereas no differences in perceived adult status were obtained between married and single unemployed male characters.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Discussion

Elsewhere, we have suggested that adolescents acquire implicit theories of adulthood (cf. Ross, 1989) that inform the expectancies which adolescents hold about their own futures as well as their beliefs regarding the prescriptive occurrence and timing of events in adulthood (Greene, et al, 1991a, 1991b); as noted previously, such theories are highly related to gender (Greene & Wheatley, 1991a; Greene et al, 1991a, 1991b; see also Deaux & Major, 1987).

The present findings indicate that implicit theories also inform adolescents' beliefs about the transition to adulthood. When asked to think about <u>becoming</u> an adult or to evaluate the adult status of a given individual, different weightings of social status parameters (e.g., transition accomplishment) appear to be elicited for women than for men. Thus, as in the present study, the transition to marriage was more determinative of perceived status in female than in male characters.

The present findings also indicate that adolescents may perceive marriage to be a unique marker of adult status for women as compared to men. This interpretation is consistent with Greene and Boxer's (1986) observation that a daughter's divorce had more

negative impacts on parents' perceptions than a son's and more negative impacts than any other transition reversal (e.g., unemployment) experienced by a son. Perhaps because of females' earlier socialization in and facility with interpersonal relationships (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Fischer, 1986), adolescents' implicit theories differentially weight social, as compared to occupational or educational, role transitions in the evaluation of adult status among women as compared to men.

Most importantly, the present findings suggest that both male and female adolescents share implicit theories of the adulthood transition. To the extent that similiar expectances have been found to differentiate later life outcomes (Hogan, 1985, 1986), future research would do well to examine longitudinally, the mechanisms by which implicit theories are instantiated during childhood and maintained over the course of adolescence.

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Footnotes

[1] For fuller consideration of adolescents' perceptions of adult status, the reader is referred to Greene, Wheatley, and Vogel (1991) and Greene, Wheatley and Aldava (1991).

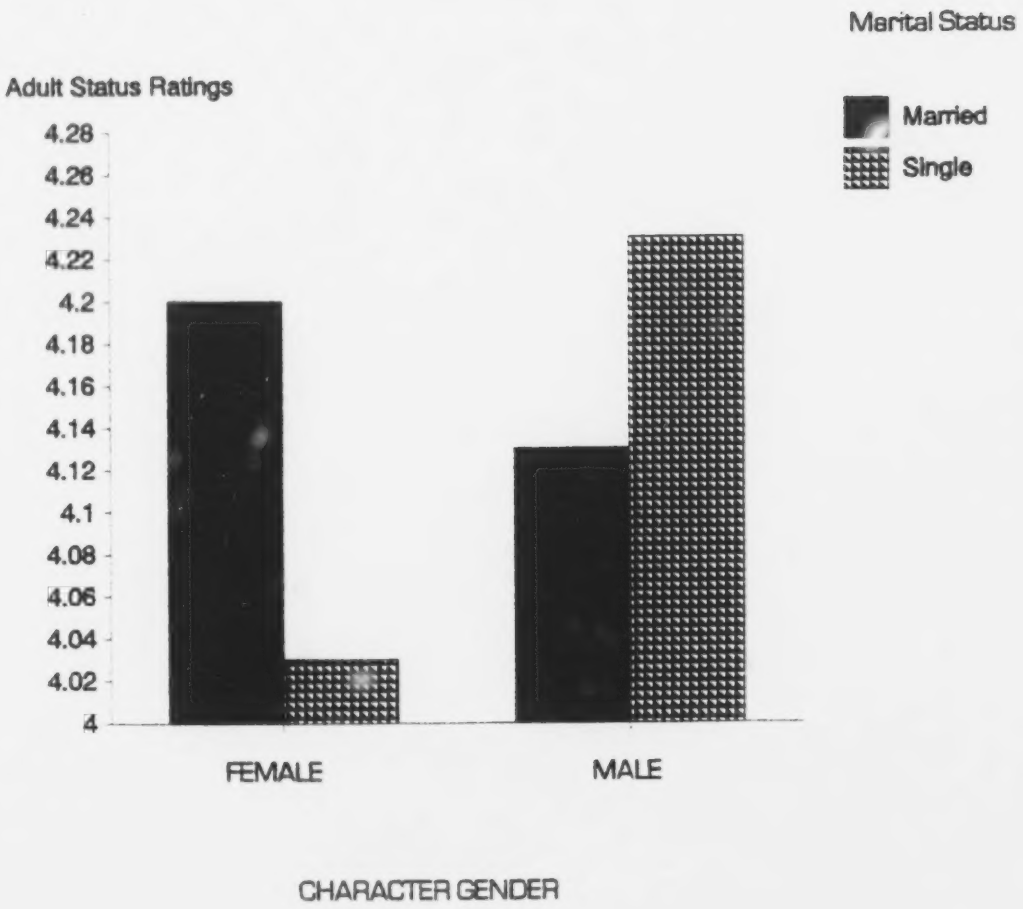
Marital Status
Married
Single
Adult Status Ratings
4.28
4.26
4.24
4.22
4.2
4.18
4.16
4.14
4.12
4.1
4.08
4.06
4.04
4.02
4
FEMALE
MALE
CHARACTER GENDER

Figure 1. Character gender x marital status interaction in perceived adult status ratings.

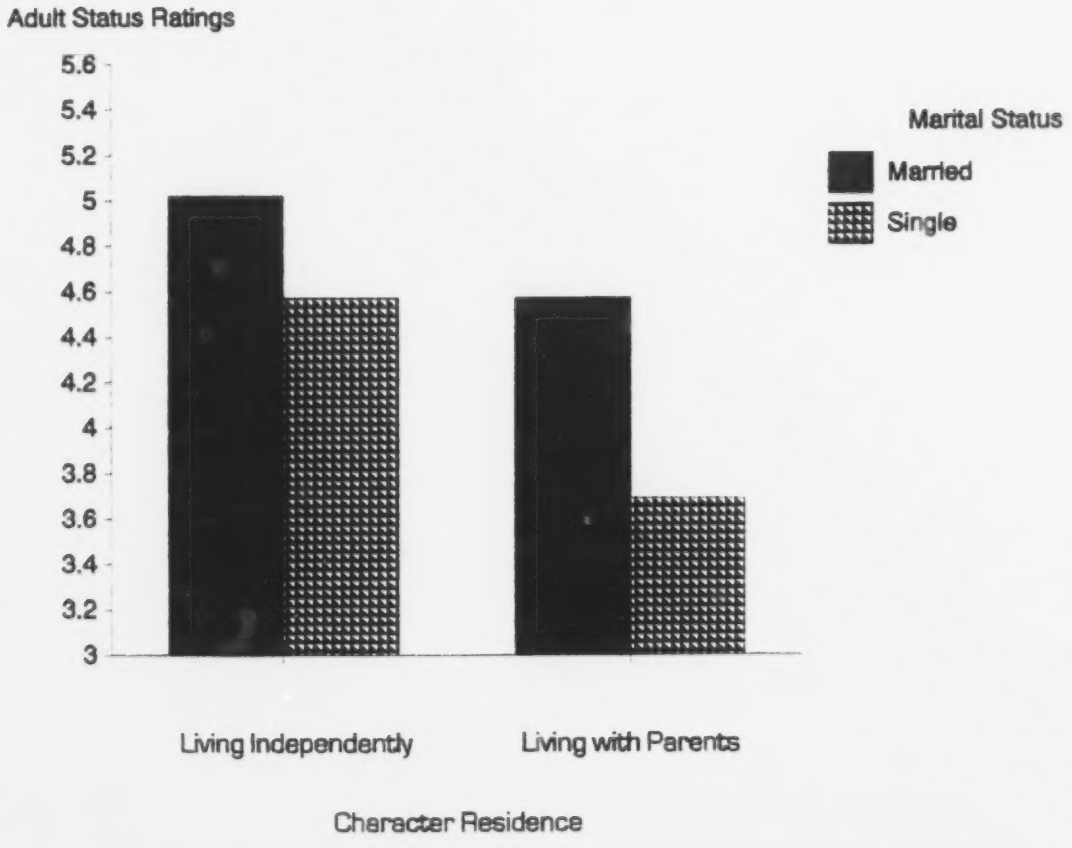
Adult Status Ratings
5.6
5.4
5.2
5
4.8
4.6
4.4
4.2
4
3.8
3.6
3.4
3.2
3
Marital Status
Married
Single
Living Independently
Living with Parents
Character Residence

Figure 2. Character residence x character marital status interaction in perceived adult status ratings.

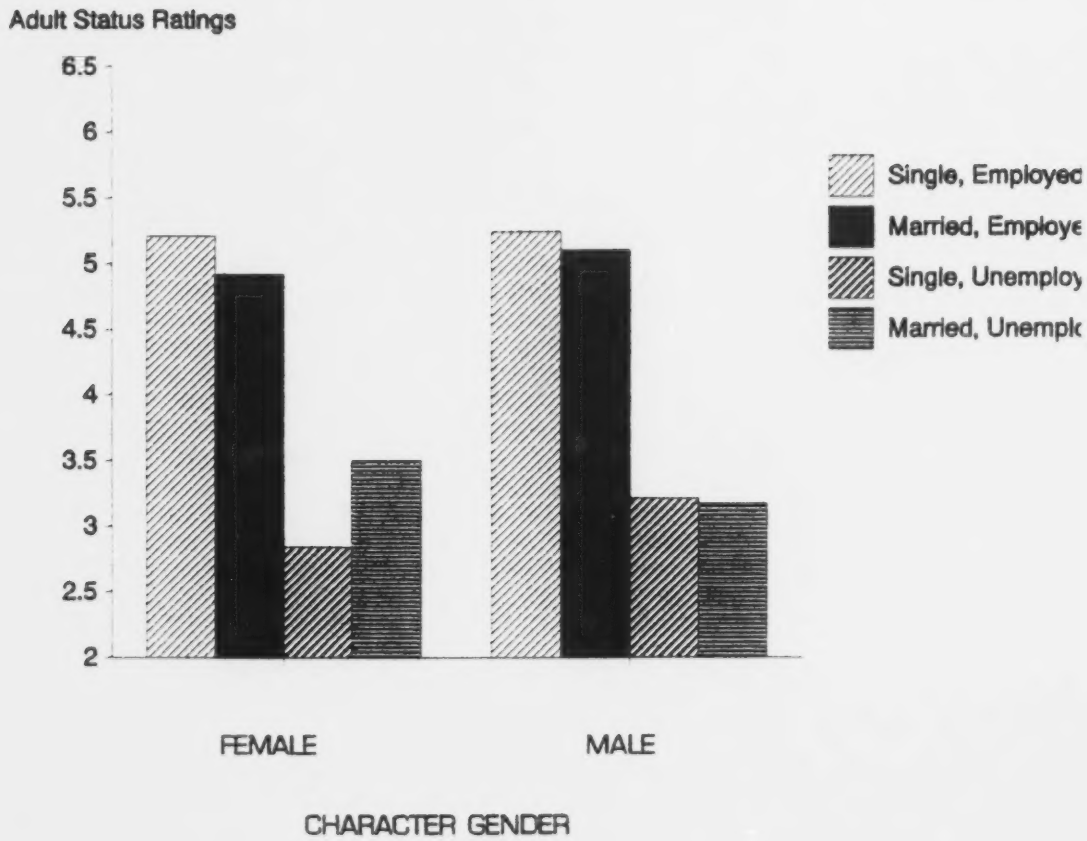
Adult Status Ratings
6.5
6
5.5
5
4.5
4
3.5
3
2.5
2
Single, Employed
Married, Employe
Single, Unemploy
Married, Unempl
FEMALE
MALE
CHARACTER GENDER

Figure 3. Character gender x marital status x employment interaction in perceived adult status ratings.